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THE COUNTRY MY FATHER TOLD ME OF

BY HARRISON RHODES

THE middle years of one's life are not the pleasantest to be in, these days of war. The late forties and the early fifties hold in them few possibilities of the valiant deeds and shining sacrifices which light up fitfully our darkened world. We who are of that generation may carry a flame within our hearts, but in this world's greatest event we are, after all, but in the reserves. We are far from being useless—indeed there are ten thousand ways in which we serve, and serve gladly, but each man of us knows within him that this is not his war, that the supreme sacrifice and the supreme glory of victory, when it shall come, are youth's, youth's straight and beautiful in khaki. There is here no pretension to being the mouthpiece—even self-appointed—of the middle-aged of America, least of all any intention of picturing the generation of the forties and fifties as morbidly unhappy because they are not young again. Let us be honest. While they do their duties behind the lines cheerfully, willingly and well, there may even quite conceivably come moments when it seems comfortable, since it is inevitable, that these duties are *not* in the firing line. It would be natural and perhaps not very shameful that the flesh of middle age should sometime be weak and reluctant; yet the spirit has its times of strength and vision when these same comfortable men must quietly feel something of the bitterness of chances lost, and find it hard, as they see the flag fluttering against the blue sky, not to be following it to the end, whatever that end may be.

Our fathers, North and South, fought their war; our sons, not we, fight ours. We have somehow fallen in between and to all of us must come moments when we feel that as once the

world was saved for us by those who went before so now it must be saved for us by those who come after. We stand between two greater generations than our own, between two great periods of the nation's history when America was put to the test, and so God send it, in neither case found wanting.

Yet, though we now take the lesser part, we are the bearers of a great tradition. We can tell our sons of what our fathers did, and so hand on the torch. We can tell them what America was in their grandfathers' days. The story of how she rose to the emergency in '63, and of how both sides, North and South, fought and bled for what seemed to them ideals can never be retold too often; it cannot but heighten our military and civilian courage now to know how hard they fought. Yet it is not just from this point of view that I, of the generation in between, would now write of the country my father told me of, the America of antebellum days, the Ohio of his youth. It is because, so today we all believe, on the whirlwind of the Great War the Revolution is coming, bringing in a simpler, fairer life for all, and because in the picture I can make myself of this earlier America of my father and your father's boyhood I find what may possibly be hints and lessons for the new America of my old age and yours and of our grandsons' boyhood.

They lived simply and frugally in the Northern Ohio of those days. In the farming and dairy country and the small villages that dotted it, money in any modern sense was unknown. I have the honor to be descended from a rich maternal grandfather—he may have had an income of three thousand dollars a year! But no one in the village had much more. With such a fortune elegance was quite within reach. It is true that my grandmother did the cooking and most of the housework. But my mother had a square piano with carved legs and, when she was at the Eclectic Academy at Hiram, had, so I have been told and like to believe, the prettiest clothes of any girl there. And, if you have a taste for clothes, are there ever any clothes better than the prettiest? Under any new régime the Revolution may subject us to it is probable that an income of three thousand a year, a square piano with carved legs, and if we have any real gift for clothes the prettiest clothes will be within everyone's reach.

Perhaps this old Ohio was not as I see it—I cannot give memories, only handed-down traditions. But it seems to me that riches were so rare that they were not, as they have

sometimes seemed lately to be in America, the chief source of distinction. Distinction was a more personal thing then, it proceeded from native qualities of mind and heart and the use to which you put them. It was the era of a passionate belief in education; this indeed was, as I figure my father's youth, the chief animating desire of him and all his friends. I have a few letters written to him while he was at the little freshwater academy on the hill, by his sister at home. There was a younger brother who wanted to go up to the academy for a term, but my aunt feared that he would not be able to do so because all my grandfather could give him to go on was three dollars! Yet, incredible as it sounds, it appears from a later letter that he did start on this great educational adventure with these funds and these only in his pocket. I know that my father had at one time the job of ringing the early chapel bell and got fifty cents a week for it—perhaps he turned over this post to the ambitious younger brother.

It must have been easy to teach such students. One of my father's few proud boasts had to do with the days when he had become a teacher at the college. He wanted to give a certain course of lectures, but there was no hour free for it except the time before chapel and even before breakfast. He decided to risk it, however, and at seven in the morning had almost half the college in attendance!

It was "book-learning" and literature and the graces of life that they were after in those days. The book I value most of the few I own is a yellow somewhat tattered volume of Macaulay's *Essays*, bound in a dingy brown paste-board cover. It is a cheap American reprint in a type so small that no one nowadays with any respect for his eyes would even attempt to read it. It has on the fly leaf in his handwriting a statement that it was the first book my father ever bought, and I remember his telling me that he secured it second hand and that it was a great bargain at sixty cents. Macaulay is out of fashion now but between those brown paste-board covers in that infernal print there was an immense store of information set forth in what seemed to the taste of that time some considerable splendor of language. For a boy in a northern Ohio farmhouse the gates must indeed have opened upon a new world, let into the old a clear, invigorating air. Afar from the hilltop of little Hiram with its Eclectic Academy the beacon of education must have flared and called. Not so did I later, with things made easy, go to

Harvard. But so I believe will the sons of the new democracy take themselves to their shrines of learning.

It is now a long time that technical training or preparation for the triumphs of big business are what is mostly asked of education. "Book-learning" is almost despised, nobody wants it nowadays very passionately except Russian Jews in the slums of our great cities and young negroes in the cabins of the South; no one else believes in education in the old sense. But will it be so in the days to come? Our young agitators today are by no means turned away from letters and the graces. Even the I. W. W. produce poets. It is at least open to an optimist to believe that when the economic struggle for existence is a little relaxed the proletariat will have something of the same zest for education as had boys and girls in Ohio in those earlier times. One term my father and a chum, both in low financial waters, "boarded themselves" and subsisted for weeks on a diet that nowadays would recommend them vastly to Mr. Hoover, "cornmeal mush" cooked by themselves. Will not something of the fine fervor for the better things of life which was boiled into that humble dish stir the boys of the young twentieth century? Isn't this the kind of simplicity and asceticism which will enable us not only to win the war but to confront life after it? What America has done cannot America do again?

It is pleasant—pleasant for me at least—to linger over the tales and traditions of my father's teaching days at the little college. There was an enthusiastic band of them in the faculty, James A. Garfield and a wonderful Miss Almeda Booth, who has never been forgotten in that part of Ohio, and others. They had all of them an exuberant and full-throated delight in letters and learning and their talks were *noctes ambrosianæ*. Somehow it seems to me that before their eyes all English literature glittered as if the dew still lay upon it. They were far from the centers of light and leading in the East. But pilgrims sometimes came, bringing news of Cambridge and Boston and Concord. There is a pleasant passage in one of Mr. Howells's recent books in which he tells of a late afternoon on Garfield's porch at Hiram when his host suddenly rushed to the fence and called to the people of the houses near by to "come over." "He's telling about Longfellow and Emerson and Thoreau!" he cried. Does not such a world seem young and happy and right?

It was the custom of those simple days to teach a term at a district school and then, on the tiny hoard saved, study a term at some academy or college. Education in Ohio was there for you, but you had to want it. And something like this seems to me what we may hope for in the socialized future; not that everyone shall receive the higher education quite as a matter of course, but that it shall be there for those who really want it and will work for it. There must have been something pleasant too in sharing your education as you went along, a kind of cheerful and generous community of the goods of the mind. You paused a little while in the district school to help those who were behind you in the road. Will not the new world be built in and by such pauses to help? No personal anecdote which my father could tell me had quite the thrill of the one in which he, a slim boy of sixteen, faced a new school in which boys, bigger than he and bent on mischief, awaited him as pupils. Would moral discipline win or would the secretly frightened young teacher be forced to attempt corporal punishment upon these husky giants? Such were the perils and adventures of education then.

If Germany and Germanized socialism should win we shall all be bound as with chains to the occupation in life appointed for us. But if the Democracy is triumphant we shall hope for a fluidity of social movement much beyond what we have now. The land now is full of unhappy square pegs in round holes, kept there, so they think, by the restriction of the capitalistic system as at present practiced. In an ideal world every one will be well fitted into his place. But this entails some experiments, some trying. Again it is useful to reconstruct our parents' world. There they tried experiments.

After the period of being alternately teacher and student my father became teacher altogether. As I say "altogether" I realize that this is not quite true. For he soon began to try his hand at preaching. He was never ordained but there were villages here and there that sent invitations to the young professor to come to them on a Sunday, when he stayed at some leading citizen's house and made the occasion agreeable socially as well as religiously, we may believe. It was thought by many that he would definitely choose the ministry but other calls rang in his ears and he was later the editor of the big newspaper in the nearby city. But for all the energy

this shifting and these occupations implied he was a lover of peace and quiet and books and green fields and he turned to a leisurely practice of the law. He was, in the final summing up, not ambitious, as we later came to understand the word, either of money or position. He wanted contentment, and I think found it in ways that perhaps hold a hint for the generation that is now marching ahead into a simpler world, into one more like his.

I think it was an unsnobbish country, that of my father's youth. Certainly a cheerful democracy of feeling lingered on with him to the end. I, as of a younger more vitiated time, used sometimes to urge social distinctions upon his notice, but he maintained the air of believing that they did not exist. I remember for me almost painful moments of fraternization, once with some Irish laborers in a third class carriage bound from Liverpool to Holyhead and Dublin, and again with a queer frowsy Dutch priest who could only manage conversation in a little broken Latin and took us with him to his hotel in Amsterdam, a cheap and unworthy hole I thought. I would give a good deal if I had any such ease in a third class carriage, while the Latin talk seems now to make my Harvard training ineffectual beside that obtained at little Hiram on the hill.

My father had an unconquerable optimistic belief that a human being was generally welcome everywhere. We were great walkers and sight-seers. He and I were used to plunge unhesitatingly past "no admittance" and "no trespass" signs. I hesitated, but I followed him. The rule was, so my father asserted, to go ahead until someone stopped you and turned you back. We were stopped often enough, but we were rarely turned back. Indeed we generally ended by seeing whatever it was we had wanted to see under the friendly guidance of those whose business it theoretically was to eject us. We sometimes even got lunch, and once an invitation for the night. It was like young George Ticknor, one of our earliest European tourists, in the gardens of Blenheim receiving an invitation from the Duke as a tribute to his nationality—except that I am afraid our host was somewhat less than ducal. There will be fewer of these chilling signs in the future and more of a disposition to share the beauties of the earth with one's fellow man. In more ways than one my father's rule may become a widely popular one—go ahead until some one stops you.

Some of the characteristics of this country my father told me of are gone forever, no swing of any pendulum can bring them back. The German-Americans of that day had fled from oppression at home, and though they cherished the customs and habits of the older land, they were loyal here. When the time came they helped us fight the war of the sixties. We were brought up to think of them as simple kind men and women and good American citizens. No hints were ever heard of another loyalty to Prussia, though indeed people looked not unkindly on the new Empire. There was a fat man named Harms who had a vineyard on a hillside to which I was often taken Sunday afternoons by my father. He had constructed in the very branches of a huge maple tree a platform reached by a stair-case from the ground. Here there were tables and chairs, and to sit here in mid-air among green leaves and be allowed to drink a small glass of sweet wine was the very most agreeable debauchery of my boyhood. No boy growing up now can ever see his German-American fellow citizens in any such golden mist of kindly feeling as I had for Mr. Harms. The European Germany has taken such possibilities from her descendants here—and made their way, even for the best and most loyal of them, an arid path for a long time to come.

Periods of national life come into fashion and go out of it, and it is not all a matter of furniture and wall-papers and coats and frocks. People are collecting now all the quaint house-furnishings of that time; I think they are also collecting memories. Only a few of the men and women of before the old war linger with us still. I have a sense that everywhere through the land young and middle-aged and almost old younger people are listening to them as they tell their stories for the last time, and that the country that they tell us of seems every day more lovely and simple and clean and good. Is not the money fever already waning? Is the selfishness and the self-indulgence not already burned out of us, some of it, by this our new test? Is that earlier America of our fathers a mere mirage now, or are we to find it or something of it in the later America that we catch glimpses of beyond the desert wastes of war?

As I look back and remember what my father told me, of course the great event seems their war, fought—from their point of view—to preserve the union and to free the slaves. Now we again have war, and now again there are many who

believe that there are still slaves to be freed. It is significant that one of the newest and most advanced journals of the Revolution takes for its title the historic one of *The Liberator* and brings out its first issue on Lincoln's Birthday. Does the pendulum indeed swing back? And can we recapture for our war and our reconstruction something of the fervor of our fathers—something of their high idealism? You boys who go to fight and who shall come back to direct America's course, will you listen occasionally to our stories of the land your grandfathers kept safe for you? We, the generation of your fathers, belong only between the wars. Yet we have sat at our fathers' feet, their hands have been laid on us; we can perhaps in time lay hands on you and consecrate you, hand on to you their traditions of America. And then America and democracy—in their Mr. Lincoln's phrase—shall not perish from the earth.

HARRISON RHODES.